

## ON THE PATH TO A FEDERAL PENITENTIARY

**Question:** Can we identify the criminal pathway and the characteristics of Canadian youths who eventually receive a federal penitentiary sentence?

**Background:** A great deal of attention has been devoted in the developmental criminological literature to try and explain the observation that offending escalates during early adolescence, peaks sharply in late adolescence, and declines suddenly in young adulthood. According to a number of theories, underlying this age-crime pattern there exists two categories of offenders who differ in composition, offending activity, and desistance throughout the life-course: (a) the early onset persisters (i.e., begin crime early and continue); and (b) the late onset desisters (i.e., begin crime later and desist in young adulthood). It is the early onset persisters who are thought to be responsible for the vast majority of all offences and the most serious forms of offending.

Evidence for the existence of two distinctive offending pathways has been provided in several countries with many different samples. Studies that have examined the offending trajectories of Canadian offenders are, however, scarce.

In Canada, relatively few crimes result in sentences to provincial custody (a sentence

of less than two years), and even fewer in admissions to federal penitentiaries (more than two years). Our ability to identify offenders early in their criminal careers who are at high risk to enter adult custodial facilities can thus prove to be quite valuable to criminal justice professionals and policy-makers alike.

**Method:** The study sample consisted of 514 male and female juveniles from Manitoba, Canada under a probation sentence during the years 1986 to 1991. Information on the personal-social demographic characteristics, including various indicators of risk and needs were obtained based on interviews with offenders upon their admission to supervision. The criminal careers of these youth were then tracked up to the year 2005.

**Answer:** The results revealed the presence of two sub-groups of juvenile probationers who followed distinct offending trajectories from early adolescence to middle adulthood (age 31 and up). One group comprised approximately 12% of the offenders and showed a chronic high and serious level of offending behaviour over the years. The remainder of the sample was characterized by relatively infrequent and less serious involvement in criminal behaviour over time. Their offending pattern remained fairly stable, although it tended to show a slight

decline in frequency and severity starting from age 26.

Of the risk and needs factors studied, the youths' pattern of associations was the primary predictor of group membership. Not surprisingly, the chronic high or persistent group comprised more offenders who had negative and unconstructive ties with their peers than the stable low group. Substance use also distinguished the two offending trajectory groups. A greater proportion of juvenile probationers who had substance use problems were identified as chronic high offenders, as compared to those who did not evidence difficulty with substance use.

Additional analyses indicated that the risk for being admitted into either a provincial or federal prison was markedly greater for offenders assigned to the chronic high group. For instance, approximately 40% of the chronic high offenders were admitted to a federal penitentiary during their life-course compared to less than 10% of the stable low offenders.

#### **Policy Implications:**

1. There exists a small proportion of offenders who engage in frequent and serious criminal behaviour thereby requiring selective attention from criminal justice agencies.
2. To allocate resources and efforts efficiently, intervention strategies should focus on the early careers of the chronic offenders.
3. To be effective at reducing the number of provincial and federal custodial admissions, programs and services should target both negative peer influence and alcohol/drug consumption, as these two factors place adolescents at risk of embarking on a criminal career.

**Source:** Yessine, A. K., & Bonta, J. (2008). *Pathways to Serious Offending*. (User Report 2008-01. Ottawa: Public Safety Canada.

#### **For further information:**

James Bonta, Ph.D.  
Corrections Research  
Public Safety Canada  
340 Laurier Avenue West  
Ottawa, Ontario K1A 0P8  
Phone: 613-991-2831  
Fax: 613-990-8295  
E-mail: Jim.Bonta@ps-sp.gc.ca

Also available on Public Safety Canada's website at: [www.publicsafety.gc.ca](http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca)



